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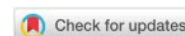
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Mapping the Trajectory of Popular Culture: From Rock Album Narratives to Video Game Transmediality

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Abstract: Popular culture is not a coherent concept; it lacks an organic whole and is subject to change. It is neither fixed nor concrete, with its modus operandi rooted in everyday life. It does not possess a definitive meaning, as it is constantly being redefined and reevaluated, and the canon of pop culture works is continually expanding. During its heyday in the 1960s, pop culture evolved, shaping both its passive and active roles. The passive (mass) aspect reflects a tendency to act as a “mirror” of reality, as it is and as it should be, adding a certain degree of glamour within the entertainment industry, major Hollywood productions, and politically correct celebrities. The active aspect relies on the potential for social action within pop culture. Pop culture has become capable of supporting and leading significant cultural changes, such as in music, film, literature, and shifting social attitudes toward war and destruction, family, religion, and other critical issues since the 1960s. In the 21st century, the activity, vitality, and relevance of pop culture are based on technology, AI, and video gaming. Other narratives become allusive and outdated, yet they still define the modes of life of the era. This paper aims to first investigate and define the trajectory of popular culture and, consequently, to project the future directions and modalities we can expect, considering the increasing significance and impact of popular culture juxtaposed with elite culture.

Keywords: popular culture, society, narratives, consumer habits

Introduction

Leading thinkers of the Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1947) described the culture industry as an “iron system” in their book **Dialectic of Enlightenment** (Dialektik der Aufklärung). They argued that entertainment is an inseparable part of this system, which aims not only to distract consumers from genuine social and political issues but also to prevent them from doubting that resistance to the system is possible. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, standardized and repetitive entertainment expects the consumer to simply say “yes” and submit, thereby maintaining the social order.

However, in the historical context of the Western world just emerging from a great war and genocide, the Frankfurt School believes that the human subject must rationalize both work time and leisure and free themselves from domination in every respect. Freedom is the key to Western democracy, but the way Adorno and Horkheimer understand and accept it is quite subjective. The culture industry plays a vital role in the cyclical manipulation of freedom; work evokes the need for escapism, and when this form of “escape” is achieved, it implies that the idle worker should return to work.

As human emancipation grew during the subsequent decades of global industrialization, with advancements in racial, gender, national, and cultural freedoms, mass culture evolved into pop culture, becoming dominant in the growing middle and working classes (television, radio, phonograph records). The negative aspects of pop culture remain, however, similar to the views of Adorno and Horkheimer: mass production, profit, lack of creators’ talent, emotional inconsistency, virtuality, passivity, and demagoguery, all of which support totalitarianism.

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Pop culture affirmatively transforms everyday life. People live through pop culture, not alongside it. Therefore, popular culture is a crucial and effective part of the material reality of history, shaping the possibilities of our existence even decades later (see more: [Shuker, 1994](#)). Subversive functions emerge in the historical context when pop culture texts become a field for expressing marginalized social identities and functions (anti-globalism, socially conscious films, albums, and songs that criticize the political system, the struggle for minority rights). Pop culture has different histories, for example, The 1960s represent the flourishing of privacy and cultural freedoms, while the 1970s are associated with feminism and the emancipation of Black culture, and as such, it represents a sort of **folie à deux** with the consumer. This means that each consumer of popular culture has the right to their own perception, classification, or periodization of it. They establish an interaction with like-minded individuals, which can create an entirely different system of cultural valuation that is subject to change and enhancement. In other words, the periods are marked by pop culture events rather than generally accepted historical facts, for example, the arrival of the Beatles in America, the release of the album "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band," and the beginning of the TV series "Star Trek", etc.

However, it strongly correlates with society, technological revolutions, and emergence and spread of Internet, which enveloped nearly the whole planet and all the people on it (see more: [Bjelajac and Filipović, 2020](#); [Bjelajac, Filipović and Stošić, 2022](#)) have brought significant changes in the way the audience consumes the works of popular culture, whether it is music or film or even video games, whose current state is a direct product of ICT development. These changes in the habits of consumers resulted in changes in how the artists conceptualize, create and distribute their works.

This paper aims to determine the everchanging landscape of popular culture, and to detect crucial events that have brought the change both in perception of works of popular culture in consumers, and in conceptual and creative changes the artists have undertaken in order to adapt to paradigm and epoch shifts. Additional goal of this paper is to identify the current trajectory of popular culture, and by using the conclusions, make projections of future changes in this important phenomenon. The starting hypothesis are that due to its intrinsic elements and its nature, popular culture took the place that was occupied by elite culture for centuries, but, due to societal and technological changes, the main carriers of narratives of popular culture have also changed.

Methodology

In the research process, we used the following methods: theoretical and interpretative method in researching the relevant phenomena in general; historical method, to research context and identify both mutual and exclusive aspects of various societal ages we have undergone over the last 70 years, the method of media content analysis in researching how cultural artefacts change through time and cultural paradigms, and methods of qualitative and comparative analysis, which helped us to draw conclusions in a broader scope that corresponds with the aims of this paper.

Music as a Catalyst for Shift of Cultural Paradigm

From today's perspective, the sixties do not just appear as a golden age; they truly were, because they were the last decade that "had a heart," which was expressed through a global pop-cultural revolt against selfishness, hypocrisy, bureaucracy, and war. On the other hand, the sixties had a supranational cultural context, initially for Western Europe, and then equally for America and Europe, in a trans-block sense. Especially since this was a time when cultural communication, in a then-divided and media undeveloped world, led to the erosion of boundaries and began to transcend political ones, laying the foundations for common, primarily pop-cultural and cultural values. Popular culture and rock and roll played a role in bridging the differences between national cultural contexts (not in the sense of annihilation, but in finding elements for mutual understanding, introducing new cultural values, reexamining old ones, etc.), and finding ways to establish communication and a new form of cultural competence and supranational paradigm.

Before 1963, the perception of pop music rested on four factors: the lyrics, the music, the attitude, and the appearance of the performer. The best example of this claim is Elvis Presley, whose presence did

not go beyond these elements. Moreover, it is possible to fully enjoy the appearance and feeling of a pop performer while the songs themselves are a completely secondary sensation. Therefore, the pop music audience was more or less differentiated, and only a minority could enjoy all the listed aspects. After 1963, record companies focused on the feelings and needs of their audience, so it is clear that Bob Dylan's lyrics were the center of attention, while for the Beatles, it was the music. Hence, the contemporary music industry is again more related to an audience with a more defined and sophisticated taste, unlike an audience that likes a bit of everything. Dylan and the Beatles helped the music industry move away from the studio and ideological constraints of the fifties, so it can be said that the most vibrant pop years were between 1965 and 1967, when the transformations of pop performers were most visible.

"Works of mass art possess an industrial character, so they navigate the sphere of production-consumption relations like fish in water. Unlike them, unadulterated works of art, those that bear the stamp of authorial individuality, created most often from purely spiritual impulses, are, by force of circumstances, left to the laws of the market."

(Božilović, 2021, page 17)

As Paul Ricoeur notes: "No culture can withstand and absorb the shock of modern civilization. There is a paradox here: how to become modern and return to sources" (Hačion, 1996, page 115). Pop had to find its own way to survive. Thus, the explosion of creativity of that time has survived as today's nostalgia industry, offering the ideals of the sixties as an eternal adolescent dystopia.

In this sense, pop music can be connected to the definition of music in general, which states that "all music is music of the people." The key demographic group of pop music enthusiasts is the baby boomer generation, followed by Generation X. Their taste in literature, film, and music created an enormous power and industry. This generation of teenagers, consciously or unconsciously, rejected the quasi-official pop culture that emerged during the Depression and war years, creating an idealized and romanticized image of the perfect American (post-war) family. The sudden rise of interest in "black" culture and an alternative view of the American heritage and dream would take teenagers far. The industry created formats, often acting subversively, i.e., industrializing the subversive, as seen in the examples of music albums dealing with activism (moderate or radical, ecological or political) like Marvin Gaye, Curtis Mayfield, or bands like the Sex Pistols, The Clash, Rage Against the Machine, and Public Enemy. With the development of technology, pop culture lost some key narratives such as the format of the conceptual or thematic album. Some important authors were dislocated in consumer confusion and transition (Neil Young, Radiohead...), while escapist entertainment became dominant, common in the digital bits of streaming services. However, the history of pop culture has always moved cyclically. According to RIAA (The Recording Industry Association of America), for two consecutive years, more vinyl records have been sold than compact discs (for example, in 2023, 43 million vinyl editions were sold compared to 37 million CDs). From 1987 to 2022, thirty-five years have passed, so primary rituals with the necessary fetishization of formats have changed significantly. CD players and CDs were much more expensive than balanced vinyl and audio cassettes, which were the absolutely dominant sound carriers for two key decades for popular music. The CD offered unrivaled sound clarity at the expense of the unconvincingness of vinyl records, which were susceptible to damage with crackling and skipping, and storage issues. The CD format carried digital sound, stronger and more pronounced, was more practical, compact, and very quickly cheaper. Hardware for playing this format was more accessible and noticeably cheaper. The peak of global consumerism (the nineties) coincided with some key and all-pervading musical genres (grunge, alternative rock, Britpop, techno, R'n'B, hip hop...), so the democratic perception of the music industry overshadowed the elitist and snobbish approach of previous eras. However, the 21st century marked the end of physical media, i.e., the need for collecting, so the multi-generational transfer was successfully completed at the beginning of the third decade of the new millennium. The transition to streaming services was entirely successful without the need for regression. In this light, the return of vinyl brings back some forgotten narratives such as the ritual of playing records, physical and intellectual activity in a shorter period compared to digital playlists that can last for hours. Consumer psychology has brought back the dramaturgy of enjoyment and pleasure. With some anthropological imperatives such as storage and belonging to a particular consumer culture. This discourse was not present for CD and cassette buyers.

“From a Lacanian viewpoint there can only be one answer: Music is the pivotal place where the voice exceeds the word so as to transgress and go beyond the Law. This is where the drive meets desire, where excessive jouissance meets logos, excess or “surplus enjoyment” meets satisfaction rather than metonymic deprivation. *Jouis-sense*, or enjoyment-in-meaning, was Lacan’s neologism for the moment when meaning is eclipsed, inverting into the excesses of a consuming self-enjoyment. In music, the glimpses and attempts at a pre-symbolic agency unbridled by the Law of castration are opened up for singers, as well as their fans. In the contemporary music scene such transgression against and beyond the Law is staged across a number of registers offering unconscious fantasies that directly cope with the de-Oedipalization of postmodernity with its paedomorphic extension of youth cultures well into their late twenties and early thirties. Some forms, as we shall see, submit to the Law of the signifier. They constitute forms of repetition and serialization in the commodity market, acting as unifying master signifiers—the moulds of identity for youth to mimic. Other affective forms such as Gangsta rap, Punk Rock, Goth, and Heavy Metal have attempted forms of transgressions to introduce a dissonance for youth rebellion and resistance against the Symbolic Order”.

(Jagodzinski, 2005, page 33)

As the core demographic of pop music consumers has remained unchanged (13-24) to this day, the music industry, at the turn of the centuries, is dominated by the “silent majority,” whose age range extends from the first official “teenagers” (baby boomers), who are now over 75 years old, to Generation X (mid-fifties). Without a doubt, young people will be the first to understand that rock and roll carries a determined message. However, that message is not necessarily related to youth per se. Therefore, the sale of pop albums by profiled teenage performers began to decline sharply at the beginning of the eighties and continues to do so today.

While the market cycles thesis offers an economic explanation for the perplexing historical shifts in popular music tastes, it has faced several criticisms. Methodological challenges arise from its initial focus on commercially successful singles, with the underlying assumption that the diversity of rock music is reflected in the hit parade. This approach neglects the predominance of “album sales over singles since the early 1970s and the generally accepted view that the longer format holds greater aesthetic value. Furthermore, the thesis interprets market diversity as a direct function of the number of individual hit records in a given year. To substantiate this argument, a critical stylistic analysis of the actual hit recordings, based on their musical features rather than the companies that released them, would be necessary. Additionally, it can be argued that independent labels’ products are not always characterized by innovation and often replicate styles already popularized by major competitors. Finally, as Peterson and Berger themselves acknowledge, the distinction between major and independent labels has been blurred since around 1970, with the two tiers of the industry historically interconnected through the majors’ control of distribution”.

(Shuker, 1998, page 186)

Digital Transformation of Popular Culture

Popular culture is typically defined as a culture that correlates with the needs of the average person, aligning cultural patterns with the educational and emotional levels of the broadest segments of society (Strinati, 2004), who have, through the natural development of society and social relations, attained complete social power and, accordingly, the right to sovereignly form their semiosphere as a bloc of semiotic units within the cultural value system (Filindash, 2023). The popular culture of that social segment, which Ortega y Gasset once referred to as the “masses” (see more: Ortega and Gaset, 2013), is today propelled by impressive ICT capabilities and represents a powerful industry producing specific products in unlimited quantities, often being used for the control and production of desirable consumer behavior (see more: Horkheimer and Adorno, 1947). Multiple replicated examples of everyday culture spread uncontrollably through ICT means, typically having a hypnotic effect on the audience.

All societies on the planet today live and share the general aspects and consequences of complete digitization, in which ICT becomes the ultimate framework not only for development but also for the existence of popular culture, and its mass distribution becomes unsustainable without mass communications,

and soon we will reach that level of dependence on artificial intelligence (AI). Entering the digital field and remaining in it as a new natural environment, tailored precisely for popular culture and its consumers, popular culture has gained new characteristics. Even routinely exploring visible changes in contemporary popular culture within the global socio-cultural space, we can undeniably state the acquisition of some convergent and participatory characteristics of popular culture. The “old,” elite culture, with its inherently closed and inaccessible semiosphere, had a small number of consumers and an even smaller number of adherents. The upcoming masses of new cultural consumers suddenly and irresistibly “pushed to the forefront of social reality determined to take the best seats and undertake the most suitable means, indulging in pleasures that were once the privilege of the few” (Ortega and Gaset, 2013, page 37). The greatly increased number of new consumers led to the erosion of the general threshold of cultural experience. The number of new culture consumers who could provide a coherent answer to Heidegger’s question: “what is artistic in a work of art” (more in: Hajdeger, 2000, page 60), or, paraphrased, what is artistic in a cultural artifact and why do we consider it artistic (if it truly is), was negligible. In addition, this “accumulation and fullness” of the first and, as immediately became apparent, privileged social ranks, did not bring a change only in the speed of distribution of cultural artifacts; it also changed the mechanism of their creation, allowing the broadest spectrum of popular culture users, and today ICT and AI culture, to collaborate and create culturally valuable and art-infused projects. Digitally transformed popular culture became capable of creating and utilizing numerous metaspaces in which it easily levitates between phenomenological and higher cognitive spheres of processing perceptions and experiences observed through the consumption of popular culture works (Filipović, 2024). The commercial symbiosis of hardware and software has brought technology to the level that it can be the driving force behind cultural institutions in their intent to modify their industry of popular culture products, not only by creating their content but by creating it together with users, receiving instant feedback from the digital consumer community, which sometimes can act as a factor of correction and adaptation of content to the needs and tastes of the culture. In the new stage of adapting popular culture to the consumer community, the new role of the mass audience, which has been upgraded from a passive receiver of cultural content to a position of not only producer but also an entity that, with its commercial capacity, determines what and in what quantity will be produced, was quickly identified. This led to the mass appearance of undesirable cultural products that were of such low quality that even the lowest segments of new consumers found them substandard, thus receiving the colloquial label of junk and kitsch (see more in: Easthope, 1991), which in several countries had legal and financial repercussions. As the next characteristic, digital popular culture permanently abandons the concept of a homogeneous audience: instead, it transforms cultural content into atomized clusters, where each user becomes an author emitting their own cultural codes and ideas.

The digital transformation of society necessarily changes the role and significance of media channels, which have in the meantime become a “conditio sine qua non” for the existence of popular culture. The altered role of media channels, which emerged as a commercial response to the demands of a new type of consumer, has led to the convergence of ICT technologies with the affirmation of visual capabilities at the expense of print, resulting in the disappearance of what was once the dominant semantic-verbal interaction among people, and the establishment of a new screen-based, visual culture.

Given that the collection of cultural practices known as popular culture itself represents the greatest transformation of culture to date (Williams, 1976), digital transformation represents a new stage and a necessary continuation of the transformation and adaptation of cultural content to new users. Building on previous transformations, digitally transformed popular culture maintains itself as the “leading means of universal conformation of mass consciousness” (Filindash, 2023). As a result of digital transformation, the archetype of the elite creative personality of the author is replaced by the archetype of the mass personality, which simultaneously possesses the characteristics of a consumer. The mechanism of incorporating the results of creative activity into the realm of mass culture is carried out by shifting the emphasis from creative value to consumer value. This explains the high rate of trend changes in popular culture. The mass individual has emerged as an expression of the changes that have occurred in contemporary society and its culture. The rapid development of technology has made culture accessible and omnipresent in the life of society; the new culture has become a highly desirable element of people’s lives, a daily and invaluable backdrop. However, the widespread availability of popular culture and, in principle, the low feedback from consumers have negatively impacted its overall quality. The elite cultural semiosphere has retained all its arrogance and independence from the commercial character of the popular culture

semiosphere. To ensure bare existence and profitable success in the market, producers of popular culture content constantly listen to the desires of the masses and, in accordance with those desires, identify and update their “range of demand” (ibid).

Although not the primary focus of this paper, it is worth mentioning the significant application of immersive technologies as one of the postulates of the digital transformation of popular culture. Immersion is often encountered in art and entertainment when authors use various interactive performances and exhibitions to create immersive experiences for their consumers. Immersion is frequently used in video games (VR games) and the film industry (3D movies). Immersive activities in the context of virtual reality and similar technologies allow users to fully immerse themselves in a virtual world and, in a way, “forget” the real world while in the virtual one. In general, augmented or extended reality technologies are used to provide presence in artificial, alternative environments and are becoming increasingly widespread in museum and exhibition practices. Digital technologies offer an attractive way of engaging with any artistic objects, notable contemporary figures, including paintings (ibid).

Immersive technologies, no matter how attractive to the audience, provoke certain objections that could be categorized as attempts to control mass opinion and produce the desired consciousness of consumers, which should be a subject of deeper analysis from the standpoint of the ethics of using immersive technologies. Replicating originals using immersive techniques creates a world of secondary reality for the person of digital culture. The high cost of replicas in the everyday mind equates their consumer and artistic value, neutralizing the value of the original and the copy. For example, in 2021, the starting price of NFT tokens of works belonging to the State Hermitage Museum at an online auction was ten thousand US dollars (ibid). The use of high artistic level samples in mass culture through digital technologies is of a dual nature: positively—as a means of education, entertainment, and inclusion into the interactive language, and negatively—as a cause of intellectual impoverishment. When it turns to works of elite art in the format of secondary pseudoreality, mass culture increases the content field and expands the social sphere of influence.

Video Games and the Evolution of the Narrative Landscape of Popular Culture

The process of digitalization and technological development has been the catalyst for one of the most significant transformations in human history, altering lifestyles, social relations, and modes of production while simultaneously introducing new products and ways of utilizing and perceiving existing products. Culture, including popular culture, could not remain immune to such drastic and pervasive changes. Certain branches of popular culture, at least in terms of their consumption methods, have undergone less dramatic changes, such as comic books and, to some extent, film. Despite the introduction of digital visual effects that were previously unattainable, watching films in cinemas has remained the most desirable and optimal way to consume film content. Naturally, the cinema industry has not remained stagnant; it has embraced new technologies to create more immersive film-watching experiences, notably through the development of significantly larger screens, such as IMAX.

The film industry experienced a brief crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which streaming services bypassed theatrical premieres and life cycles, instead showcasing films on their online platforms. However, once the pandemic subsided, theatrical premieres and screenings resumed their traditional prominence. Music, perhaps, has undergone the most significant changes. This assertion does not merely include the use of digital tools in music production but pertains to the conceptualization and methods of music consumption. This evolution began with the development of the digital .mp3 format and the subsequent changes it introduced (see: [Hinduja, 2006](#)) and continued with the advent of music streaming services like Spotify and Deezer, which have come to dominate how music is consumed. When music, which has had a narrative unity since the classical era—whether called an opera, symphony, concerto, or, in popular music, an album—serves as the foundation, the partitioning of music into individual tracks causes profound changes with at least a twofold impact: consumers no longer perceive individual tracks as part of a broader, thoughtfully conceived whole, and musicians increasingly abandon the concept of the album as a cohesive narrative entity, especially in popular music. Although some artists defy this trend, the fact remains that what was once the norm has become the exception, and these artists do not represent a substantial niche within the overall spectrum of musical creation. The narrative landscape of popular culture is now defined and shaped by the artifacts of another medium, or rather an inherently

digital art form and, thanks to digitalization, has become the most lucrative product of the cultural industry: video games.

For the sake of complete scientific accuracy, it must be noted that the first experimental products considered proto-video games were analog, such as the patent “The Cathode Tube Amusement Device” by Thomas T. Goldsmith and Estle Ray Mann, which describes the concept of controlling the position of a dot on the screen from 1947, or the game “Tennis for Two” by Willy Higinbotham from 1958 (Filipović, 2022, pages 239-240). However, the first proto-video game that was distributed in any form was digital: “SpaceWar,” created in 1961 by a group of enthusiasts at MIT, which functioned solely on the PDP-1 computer and was distributed by the computer’s manufacturer as software for its testing. From that point onward, video games have grown and evolved, becoming increasingly complex, in tandem with the development and capabilities of hardware, often initiating hardware development through symbiotic relationships with the computer hardware industry. Symbiotic relationships characterize the entire history of video games, and here we emphasize another such relationship, this time with film, which introduced video games to popular culture as early as the 1970s, and revolutionized cinematic possibilities, particularly in the domain of computer-generated effects and animation. It is noteworthy that one of the first significant films, “Tron” (1982), which featured a video game developer as its protagonist and had a narrative directly related to video games—where the developer is trapped inside interactive software and attempts to escape by performing actions reflective of video game gameplay elements—was not even nominated for an Academy Award for Special Effects, despite being revolutionary in that domain, because Academy members considered that the filmmakers cheated by using computers (see: Filipović, 2013; Filipović, 2016). Of course, over the past forty years, things have changed so drastically that it is now newsworthy when a director uses practical visual effects or shoots films in an analog format on film stock. On the other hand, video games quickly achieved immense popularity and a significant position both in popular culture and the entertainment industry, with the first video game protagonist whose popularity and recognizability transcended the medium and became a cultural artifact being Pac-Man from the 1980 game of the same name. The video game industry grew so rapidly, largely reflecting the growth of Atari, that by 1983 it suffered such a crash in the North American market that recovery forecasts were bleak. However, thanks to a series of correlating factors not detailed here, the video game industry not only recovered but, again due to a series of correlating factors not elaborated upon, has become the most profitable segment of the cultural industry and one of the most significant carriers of popular culture in the digital age. What is drastically different and new compared to most of the history of video games is their primacy and role in shaping important narratives of popular culture.

For a significant portion of their history, primarily due to technical limitations (notably hardware performance and data storage capacities), video games featured very simple narratives. The computing hardware of the time did not provide the conditions necessary for developing more complex narratives comparable to those found in other elements of popular culture. It was not until the advent of CDs as data storage media that video game developers began to address broader themes. In this context, the 1990s marked the beginning of a more substantial integration of video game narratives into the overall narrative landscape of popular culture.

The success of the 1996 video game “Tomb Raider” and its subsequent franchising, symbolized by the character Lara Croft, marked a turning point in recognizing the importance of video game narratives and their elements, such as character development. Lara Croft herself became an iconic figure in popular culture, in a manner that characters like Pac-Man or Super Mario could not. Her recognition and popularity were among the first transmedial artifacts of video games, a phenomenon that would later become far more commonplace. Besides the transmedial success of the franchise’s heroine, the overall narrative of the franchise was also adapted into other media and arts, resulting in three blockbuster films, the first of which was released in 2001—just five years after the launch of the original “Tomb Raider” game. This occurred during a time when films, particularly those of such high expense and marketing, were not typically based on video games.

After nearly twenty years and numerous unsuccessful attempts (notably the work of Uwe Boll, who adapted video games into some of the most critically panned films in cinematic history), recent times have seen several well-received films and streaming series adapted from video games. These adaptations have been well received by both critics and audiences, particularly the gaming audience, which is a crucial factor in determining the success of such cross-media adaptations (notable examples include “The Last of

Us” and “Fallout”). It appears that filmmakers have finally grasped how to successfully translate gameplay into screenplay. Consequently, we can expect further continuation of this trend, as video games have, in the meantime, produced a large number of innovative and excellent narratives, suggesting that filmmakers and creators of TV and streaming series have only scratched the surface of available material.

While the relatively sparse narratives in video games prior to the mid-1990s can be attributed to underdeveloped hardware rather than a lack of creative ingenuity on the part of video game creators, the latter half of the 1990s witnessed a significant surge in culturally significant narratives within video games. Examples include “Tomb Raider,” as well as “Grand Theft Auto,” “Fallout,” and “Silent Hill,” among others. Alongside narratives crucial to the lore of popular culture, new hardware capabilities provided a platform for artistic expression in video games, transforming the medium into a legitimate form of art.

Noteworthy creators in this context include Hideo Kojima, known for the “Metal Gear Solid” series and later “Death Stranding,” and Fumito Ueda, creator of “Ico,” “Shadow of the Colossus,” and “The Last Guardian.” These games are often cited as pivotal evidence in discussions about whether video games should be considered art.

The rapid pace of technological development has led to the democratization of video game production tools, meaning that virtually anyone with an idea and the skills to implement it could create an independent video game. This increased the number of significant games, and at the same time, significant narratives, but market hypersaturation somewhat reduced visibility. Paradoxically, the increase in the market practically led to its contraction, but this in turn brought progress in other aspects related to the video game business, such as marketing, promotion, and sales.

Looking forward, the future appears exceptionally promising, as the crucial element of hardware development is advancing faster than ever. This development is now closely linked with the evolution of artificial intelligence, which has always been an integral part of video games, even in their most rudimentary functions (see: [Filipović, 2023](#)). This synergy presents new possibilities for narrative creation in the medium of video games, reinforcing its position as a central element in both the narrative landscape of popular culture and the broader context of digital culture and the digital age.

Discussion

Listeners of traditional rock music (The Beatles, Stones, Eagles, Led Zeppelin) undoubtedly belonged to the excessive and rebellious youth of the 1960s, who constructed their identity on what might be a revolt against the older generation, aspiring for autonomy (primarily from working-class families) due to the improved living conditions following World War II. According to the “more money – more music” principle, the increased spending power of the youth created new values and ideals (expressed through musical and film tastes and, certainly, fashion). This led to the emergence of teenage culture, which was based on the contradiction between authentic and manufactured, i.e., market-imposed values versus what truly spoke for and about the youth. In attempting to understand pop music and its ambivalent impact, we arrive at the audience as the most crucial determinant of cultural significance. The audience is what imparts multifaceted meaning to the musical message, conditioned by the dynamics of the music industry (technology, production, artist’s intention, and the social location of listeners). The importance of historically situating the type of meaning in pop music rests on: industry professionals, musicians, critics, fans, and, ultimately, the mythology stemming from the fact that a significant portion of pop music and pop culture, in general, is rooted in Anglo-American hegemony, cultural imperialism, and globalization. Although original pop culture belongs to the 1960s, it is clear that generations born between 1955 and 1975 have a better grasp of the mythology of pop culture than of national history or tradition. While for the generation born before World War II pop culture represents an incomprehensible dystopia, for all others it is a form of escapism, pleasure, and identity formation. However, popular culture also belongs to those born later, the Millennials and Generation Z, and their life and, consequently, cultural habits and needs correspond to the spirit of the times and the era in which we live. This mixture of different generations with varying values and habits determines the prevailing forms of popular culture. To paraphrase Karl Marx, how we secure our existence defines all other aspects of life, including the cultural aspect, and in these differences between various generations that currently coexist lie the reasons for the shift in the cultural paradigm towards popular culture and the way cultural content is consumed, which, in turn, determines how that cultural content is, so to speak, presented. The fragmentation of music into individual tracks

as the basis for a new dominant mode of listening, through algorithmically generated playlists based on similarity, has somewhat diminished the significance of musical albums as artistic wholes, as fewer consumers listen to albums in their entirety. Of course, as previously noted, purchasing music on physical media somewhat maintains the narrative nature of musical albums as important. However, if we compare this to the distribution of video games, we can conclude that consumers who continue to purchase physical media of popular culture products predominantly belong to collectors, and the mass nature of popular culture, by its nature, places collectors and other niche or fringe groups low on the significance scale. On the other hand, the profits from digital distribution allow for the release of a limited number of physical collectible copies, which are typically very expensive, several times more so than the purely digital version. This further reduces the mass appeal and accessibility of physical copies, especially for those generations who have consumed cultural and entertainment content digitally throughout their lives.

As popular culture has taken the pedestal from elite culture because the quality and originality of their narratives were initially comparable, and in some cases even more impressive, we cannot discuss popular culture without addressing the significance and quality of its narratives. The moment popular culture loses its narrative nature, we can begin to discuss its end. However, popular culture has not lost its narrative nature, although it may seem so to certain groups of people, as serious narratives have disappeared from one form of popular culture and migrated to another. Here, we discuss the central theme of our work, music and video games, as carriers of innovative narrative functions in popular culture. The democratization of production tools has multiplied the number of performers and creators across the entire spectrum of popular culture. The fact that the audience of popular culture has altered its way of consuming pop cultural content does not mean that the overall audience has diminished. On the contrary, the audience continues to grow, enabling market success for content that would have been rejected as financially risky ten or twenty years ago. Video games like "Stray," where the player's avatar is a cat and the gameplay and mechanics correspond to the perspective and physics of a cat's movement, would not have fared well in the past market, but today, the game has achieved cult status. Games produced by FromSoftware (the Dark Souls series, Bloodborne, Elden Ring), which convey narrative and guidance solely through introductory cutscenes, flavor text, and dialogues with scattered NPCs, essentially requiring players to access community meta-knowledge of the game, have shown that rich narratives can be conveyed to audiences through extremely fragmented, if not hidden, information that provides only a fragment of the overall context. Through the gaming experience combined with such narrative techniques, the consumer perceives the narrative and its place within it. A different example is the game "Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice" and its sequel, "Hellblade II: Senua's Saga," where the narrative significance lies in the choice of game theme and the innovation in depicting psychosis, from which the protagonist suffers throughout her life. The way the internal experience of psychosis is integrated into both the narrative and gameplay of these games contributes to a powerful emotional charge that defines the gaming experience in a manner similar to the best works of literature, film, or music. Out of plethora of great video games, we have mentioned only a few which are enough to confirm our thesis that the focus of narrative function in popular culture has shifted to video games, which, along with the increasingly rapid technological growth, will likely bring the most impressive forms that will define the time to come.

Conclusions

The digital era and its socio-cultural principles have undeniably altered the method of consuming media content. The reduction in attention span, a consequence of the oversaturation of the media and cultural space, has led to the fragmentation and parceling of media content. When examining the media content observable in contemporary digital platforms, we see confirmation of this assertion. Books have been condensed into quotes, films into clips and gifs, musical albums into individual tracks or into background music accompanying photographs or short videos in social media posts. On the other hand, the audience has increased exponentially and is now gathered in practically one place, making it easy to access and deliver personalized marketing messages. This, in practical terms, represents an enormous space for creativity across the entire spectrum of popular culture, and provides creators with creative freedom, offering optimism for the future. This very space enables more frequent adaptation of works from one medium and art form to another. While film as a form of popular culture has historically been based on cinematic interpretations of literary sources and even musical albums, which is nothing new, here we

are discussing another possibility—one where increased frequency of such adaptations diminishes the visible difference between the two media or art forms. The shared audience creating this new space will, in the future, establish conditions for full transmediality, where narratives will be canonically told through, primarily, visual media. For example, a narrative begun in a film might continue through a video game and conclude in a streaming series, or any other combination of media. The future trajectory of popular culture thus appears contradictory—on one hand, forms are becoming shorter, while on the other, conditions are being created for the development of very long narratives spread across several different media and art forms. However, in this case, it is not a paradox but rather an additional proof of the assertion about market oversaturation, where it seems there is still space for both existing and emerging forms.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, A.M.F. and A.S.J.; methodology, A.M.F.; resources: A.M.F. and A.S.J.; supervision: A.M.F.; writing—original draft preparation, A.M.F. and A.S.J.; writing—review and editing, A.M.F. and A.S.J. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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